


Baumgras, 1911

Drawer 19a

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Artists of Abraham Lincoln portraits

Peter Baumgras

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

A Forgotten
American Portrait-Painter

PETER BAUMGRAS

1827-1903

A SKETCH, *with illustrations,*

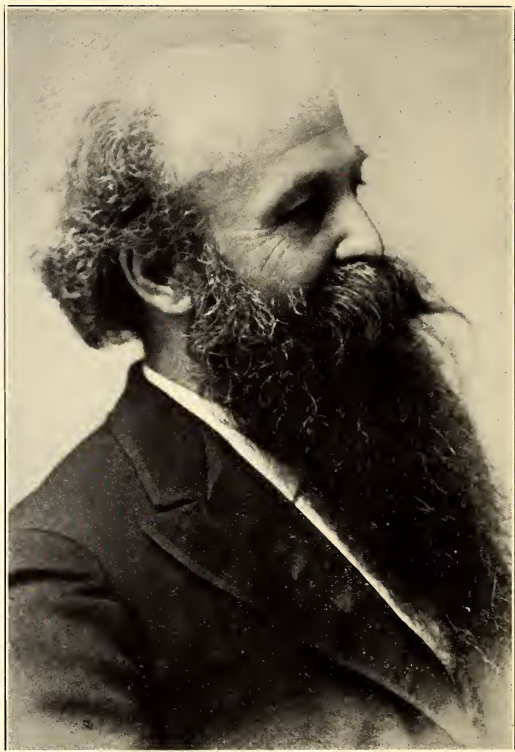
BY PROFESSOR WALDO S. PRATT, L.H.D.

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1937



PETER BAUMGRAS

[1827-1903]

From a family photograph taken in Chicago

A FORGOTTEN AMERICAN PORTRAIT-PAINTER

The Library of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, has long been well-known as the possessor of several special collections of books in various departments. Notable among these is the large treasury of literary and historical material that constitutes the John Hay Memorial Collection, with its invaluable light upon the character and work of Abraham Lincoln, as well as upon Hay's long career as diplomat abroad and ultimately as Secretary of State.

As an addition to this collection, the Library late in 1931 bought a portrait of President Lincoln which is now somewhat famous for its effective delineation of its subject. The face expresses that singular union of stern determination with exquisite and patient tenderness which every painter and sculptor has sought to depict. The pose resembles that of a well-known photograph, by which it may have been influenced. But this picture was undoubtedly made from personal knowledge, as Lincoln is known to have been intimate with the artist and may have given him formal sittings before the fatal attack on April 14, 1865. Until the picture came to Providence it had always been treasured in a family related to the artist. Its date is 1865.

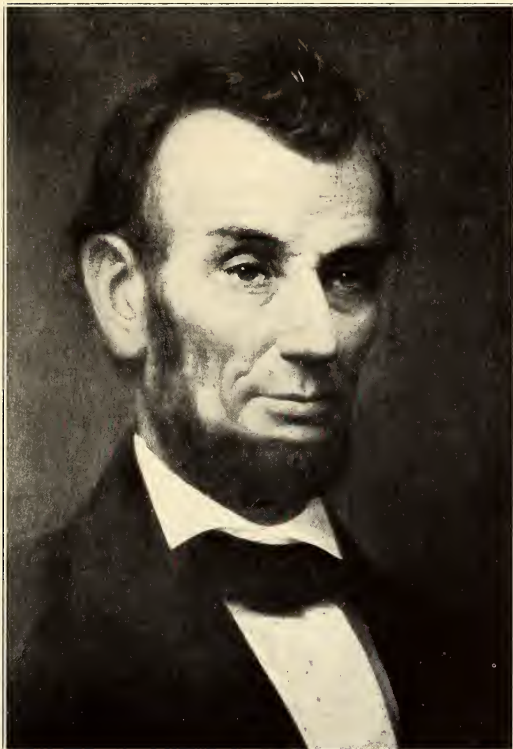
The painter's name, as the signature shows, was Peter Baumgras, then of Washington. One might suppose that it would be easy to secure information about him and his work. But at first the quest seemed hopeless. The Corcoran Gallery in Washington reported that it knew only the name and the fact that he was once known in Washington

as skillful in "still life" painting. No printed reference to him seems to be accessible.

At length, however, a clue was accidentally caught, revealing that three of the artist's children were still living, and that they were able and willing to supply a wealth of detail not only as to his varied and adventurous career, but also as to the probable amount of his activity in portraiture. It is true that the larger part of his work in this field cannot now be traced. But the eminent refinement and beauty of such of his portraits as can be located implies an artistic gift that merits record and consideration. It is at least clear that here we find a highly-trained and effective artist who for over forty years was admired in four American cities and was intimate with many leading men in his profession during the Civil War period and thence onward till almost 1900. A generation ago, therefore, his incessant teaching and the example of his works may well have been more influential and stimulating than has been generally realized.

Turning now to the outline of his career, we note that the year 1937 is the one hundred and tenth since his birth on January 4, 1827. He was born in the small town of Homburg, not far from the southern border of the Rhenish Palatinate, then part of Austria. The family name, however, was French rather than German, namely, Baumegras (bôm-grah), and was so pronounced by the artist and his family. His technical education began at Dusseldorf, whence he soon went for a full course at the Königliche Akademie in Munich. There he won special attention from the art-loving King Ludwig I, so that he held a scholarship, besides having unusual privileges for travel.

He came to America when about twenty-five years old, so that his coming may have had some connection with the notable influx of German immigrants that was conspicuous from 1848 onwards. He settled first at Syracuse, New York, where two brothers had preceded him. There



PORTRAIT OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

[Dated 1865]

By the courtesy of Brown University Library, Providence, R. I.

he soon became head of the local Turnverein and was so popular that once he was proposed as mayor of the city. He was in request as a teacher, and presently he married one of his pupils, Mary Brainerd Thomson, who was later well-known in New York and Chicago as a skillful painter of flowers.

After living four or five years at Syracuse, Baumgras removed to Washington, D. C. — perhaps as early as 1857. At first his home and studio were at 486 Twelfth Street, but later he shifted the latter to Pennsylvania Avenue.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861 he promptly enlisted as a volunteer on the Union side. But he did not see actual service on the field, since at once his artistic gifts led to his assignment to act as medical and surgical draughtsman in the hospital department in or near Washington. He thus supplied valuable material for reference that is now secured through photography.

In Syracuse and still more in Washington the artist was busy over manifold small works and more or less also in portraiture. He seems everywhere to have been made welcome in the best society — as in Washington at the noted salon of Admiral Dahlgren's second wife. Thus he steadily gained friends and patrons among various famous and influential people. It is supposed that he had some share in the interior decoration of the great Rotunda of the Capitol building as it was then approaching completion in the form that it now has. That he turned often to small and decorative forms of picture was most natural, not only because of his taste for delicate and even minute work, but also because such pieces were in special demand. But what are now known as his most successful portraits also date from this period.

His technical style may be seen to be based upon that of the Munich school, where he had his early training. But as an artist he was steadily growing in freedom of design and in a masterly handling of values and colors, with a sure instinct as to the choice of pigments and the

wielding of the brush. It was in his portraits that he evidently gave rein to his own fresh and sensitive individuality, with a clear insight into what a face reveals and an equally clear power to use pigment and brush to record what he saw and felt.

For considerable periods while in Washington Baumgras taught drawing at the Naval Academy at Annapolis and also at the Columbian Institution for the Deaf and Dumb (now Gallaudet College), just outside the city-limits of Washington. One can readily understand that the problem of self-support for an expert artist with a growing family must have been difficult in the unsettled society of Washington during the Civil War and in the years that followed. Hence soon after 1870 we find him driven to think about other places of work. This was the more natural to him because of an inborn restlessness and a craving for variety of inspiration and opportunity.

The full story of his movements during the next few years cannot now be recovered. But various salient points are known that connect him with the main places where he sojourned or settled from time to time. His first daring adventure was to set out for the Pacific Coast early in the '70s by way of the Panaman sea-route. While at Panama he was fascinated by the tropical foliage and scenery, so that he lingered, at first held by a severe attack of yellow fever, at least long enough to execute several out-door studies, some of which are still known to exist. In time he pushed on to San Francisco, doubtless hoping to profit by the era of prosperity that followed the completion in 1869 of the first transcontinental railroad. Besides painting some portraits and smaller pieces, in 1871 he was employed by the eminent naturalist Agassiz to make sundry drawings and paintings in connection with the latter's Californian trip in that year. He also completed a large painting of the Yosemite Valley — his largest work in landscape — which long hung in the Wormley Hotel in Washington, but has now become untraceable. It would be interesting if it could be

compared with the famous work by Bierstadt on the same subject (about ten years earlier). Somewhere in his Californian period Baumgras spent perhaps a year at Vancouver, of which no records are available.

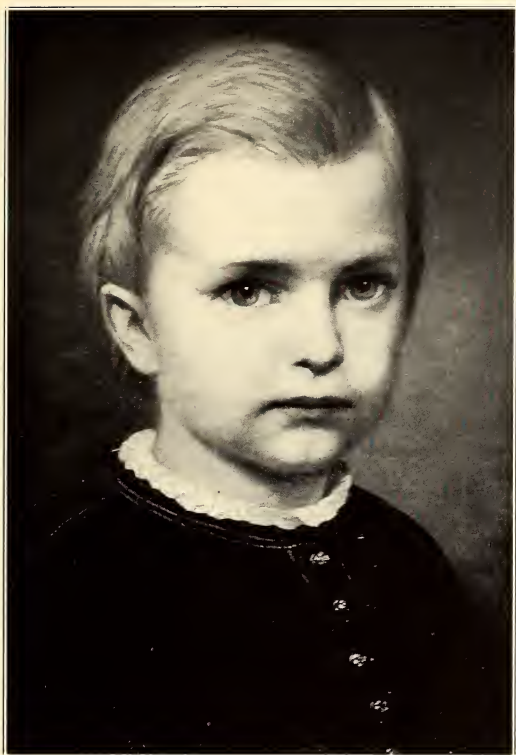
Turning eastward, we find the artist in 1877-78 an instructor at Urbana, Illinois, in what presently became the University of Illinois. Thence, apparently because of some question over teaching methods, he removed to Chicago, which proved to be his longest residence in America. Between 1885 and 1897 he was almost always represented in the annual exhibitions of the Art Institute, but not by portraits, though he is known to have worked somewhat in the latter field. After twenty-five years in Chicago, he died there of apoplexy on October 18, 1903.

It was in Chicago especially, as somewhat earlier in Washington, besides being assiduous in varied production, that he steadily enlarged his personal acquaintance among members of his own profession. Thus he is known to have been intimate with leading painters like Healey, the elder Inness, Elkins, Bierstadt, Chase and Weil, perhaps with many more.*

Why he was much sought after as friend and companion can be seen in the fine photograph prefixed to this sketch, dating from the height of his Chicago period. It shows buoyant vitality, high intelligence and inherent nobility of character, all irradiated by evident geniality and the power of sympathy.

Of the five children that made up the Baumgras family, the eldest died in infancy and the last, after evincing high gifts in sculpture and being a pupil of the late Lorado Taft, was cut off at eighteen on the brink of his career by

*It is a curious fact (connected with Washington) that Mrs. Fasset's large picture of an open session of the famous Electoral Commission (finished in 1880 and bought for the Capitol building) contains, among the reporters watching the proceedings, a portrait from life of Mrs. Baumgras's mother, then writing for a Syracuse paper.



PORTRAIT OF A LITTLE BOY

[*Theodore Putnam Pratt, 1863-1867*]

By the courtesy of the Children's Museum of Hartford, Conn.

drowning in a marine accident. The remaining three, the only daughter and two brothers, are at present living in Boston, Washington and Chicago respectively. The daughter, Irene, early showed such musical talent that she was in time enabled to go to Berlin for study to become a concert-pianist. There in 1884 she married a fellow-student, Philip Hale, who was born at Norwich, Vermont, in 1854 and graduated from Yale in 1876. After extended musical study abroad and also some experimenting in law at home, from 1889 Mr. Hale devoted himself to music-criticism in Boston, speedily gaining international renown in that special field. He died in 1934.

The two portraits here taken for illustration seem to be the best examples that can now be located, especially as they are both in perfect condition, and as neither of them has hitherto been used for publication. That of President Lincoln represents the treatment of a mature subject, one requiring a peculiar insight into a complex character. This portrait was almost certainly made from life, as Lincoln was a friend of the artist and often visited his studio. That of the Little Boy, on the other hand, evinces an equally acute sympathy with child-nature, besides having a singular charm of pose and detail. This portrait was made after the boy's death in 1867, but aided by a photograph and by the artist's intimacy with the boy when alive. These two are enough to display the eminent keenness of observation and warmth of feeling with which Baumgras approached his subjects and the technical skill with which he expressed himself through palette and brush. He became most eloquent when stirred by admiration and affection.

No adequate list of his many portraits can now be made. It is certain that in Washington, San Francisco and Chicago he was often called upon for works of this class which are now lost, not even their subjects being known. But several from his Washington period can be traced to some extent.

These include two Civil War heroes — that of General John Sedgwick, now on exhibition at the Lincoln Museum in Washington (somewhat defaced by malicious injury), and that of General James R. Garfield (later President), this latter now untraceable, though surely made. During the same period he made several family portraits — such as at least two of his wife (one now owned by the Chicago son and the other by an art-dealer in Kennebunk, Maine), one of his eldest son while a baby and another of his daughter as a child (the latter being in Chicago). It seems that he also made a self-portrait (by means of a mirror), probably while at Chicago.

It may be added that in Washington there is an ideal picture, known as "The Miner's Dream", which involves something like portraiture. This dates from the artist's San Francisco period.

Of course, photographs only dimly suggest color effects. All of Baumgras's known works, whether portraits or smaller delineations of flowers and fruits, display a notable skill as a colorist and a gift for delicate shading of tints and the distribution of values, together with a fine instinct in the choice of pigments. Thus his extant pictures remain almost as fresh as when first painted.

Considering that he moved as an equal among the other artists of his time and is still represented by such works as are here mentioned, it seems that Peter Baumgras should be remembered as much more than a clever painter of decorative pieces, but still more as a portraitist of distinct merit, perhaps of a power and influence not hitherto recognized.





ABRAHAM LINCOLN. BY PETER BAUMGRAS. 1865
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ARTVUE

Baumgardner, Mrs.

Drawer 19a

April 2

